



THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

November/December, 2012

The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen, dedicated to productive dialogue between research and practice. Sponsored by the Taos Institute (www.taosinstitute.net).

“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
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IMPORTANT !

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Many thanks, Ken and Mary Gergen

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*** COMMENTARY Meditations on Relational Fire ***

It was a cold, grey and rainy day in mid December. I awoke early, and slowly plodded my way to the kitchen. The house was dark and no life was stirring. I looked out on the colorless landscape, much as it had been the previous day. And the day before that. Slowly I found myself asking questions I otherwise like to avoid: where do I begin this day, and why? What is worth doing; how and why should I “light the fire” of the day? Nothing seems intrinsically significant, even my life itself. The questions moved me to meditate, “Well, Mary would love a coffee when she wakes,” “Paul is waiting anxiously for my comments on his paper.” “Michael was really hoping we could pick up our grandson from school today.” “Maggie was hoping we would come to dinner.” Slowly I began to realize that almost all the reasons for lighting the fire of the day were lodged in my relationships. Typically these were also relations of love, care, and respect. Even when I thought about motivational sources that seemed “mine alone,” they had a relational source. I love to write, but isn’t it always with an appreciative audience in mind? I go out of my way for delicious food, but could not imagine eating it alone. And didn’t I acquire my love for art and music from others’ enthusiasms?

I then began to ponder the 27 victims of the tragic school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. What could possibly move this young man to murder all these innocent children? As the facts of his life began to emerge, a familiar pattern began to form: he was a loner, without friends, without organizational ties, and alienated family relations. There were none of the relational connectors that would create the value of others, the importance of nurturing the process of relating. And indeed, without these connections there was reason for animosity toward those cozy bands that “abandoned” him, cast him out of the halls of meaning making.

There are important implications here for aging. Everywhere there is evidence pointing to increased depression and suicide in aging populations. Why should one go on living when each day is effectively “cold, dark, and rainy?” As one ages, there is typically a reduction in one’s relational life. As my grandmother remarked when approaching her hundredth birthday, none of her friends remained alive. For the aging individual, the challenge then is to devote special attention to nurturing and sustaining one’s relations. Go the extra mile, even when inconvenient. Further, do not rely on your existing network of relations alone. Seek ways to expand the arena of connection, whether face to face or electronically. As our Newsletter has often reported, those who keep socially connected are better off in myriad ways.

There are also policy implications. Where the individual needs and capacities of older people have typically been foremost in planning, more attention should be paid to satisfying the relational needs of people, old or young. With vital relationships, there are vital beings.

Ken Gergen

RESEARCH

* Generativity and Health in Later Life

Erik Erikson, the famous developmental theorist, long ago suggested that a successful adulthood, especially in the latter years, depended on caring for those who will follow after oneself. He used the term “generativity” to refer to activities dedicated to enhancing the well-being of others, especially younger people. Although generativity may provide one with a nurturing sense of fulfillment, the question raised by this research is whether it might also contribute to physical health.

To explore, researchers drew from a national sample of adults 60-75, who were assessed twice (1995, 2005) on various attitudinal and health related topics. In these telephone surveys, participants were asked how generative they felt they were in their lives. For example, “How much do you feel others need you,” “have skills to pass along,” and “have a good influence on others?” A second measure of generativity asked respondents to rate their current level of contribution to the welfare and well-being of others, including friends, family and the community. Various demographic indicators

were also obtained from the participants, such as age, sex, educational levels, and ethnicity, as well as health indicators. They were also asked about physical activity, smoking, social contacts, productive activity, including jobs and volunteer commitments, and emotional wellbeing. Most importantly, researchers also noted changes in disability and death over the ten year period.

The results of the study indicated that generativity is a very powerful means of maintaining a healthy life. Adults rated as most generative in their 60's and 70's were less likely to experience increases in disability or to die as they aged into the next decade. Regardless of their health conditions and demographic features, generativity had a positive relationship with their physical well-being. The reason for this relationship remains unclear. Possibly a general satisfaction with oneself reduces stress and contributes to positive functioning of the immune system.

From: Contributing to others, contributing to oneself: Perceptions of generativity and health in later life by Tara L. Gruenewald, Diana H. Liao, & Teresa E. Seeman. *The Journal of Gerontology, Series B. Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 67, 660-665.

* Physical Decline: Who Cares?

It is common to fear the loss of health. As people often say, "you are lucky to have your health," as if your happiness will soon fly from the window. And isn't it obvious that people whose physical and cognitive functionings are waning, will suffer their loss? Recent research draws a radically different conclusion. This study, published online in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, upends the stereotype of old age as a uniformly unhappy experience. And—even more surprising—the older the adult the more likely he or she was to report a high degree of successful aging. In fact, older age was associated with a higher rating of successful aging, despite worsening physical and cognitive functioning.

In this study researchers surveyed 1,006 community-dwelling adults aged 50 to 99 in San Diego County. The adults answered a 25-minute telephone interview followed by a comprehensive mail-in survey of physical, cognitive, and psychological functions, including positive psychological traits and self-rated successful aging, scaled from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). Over all, there was a decline in physical and cognitive functioning with age. Most surprising, however, older individuals in the cohort reported higher rates of successful aging despite worsening physical and cognitive

functioning. “It was clear to us that, even in the midst of physical or cognitive decline, individuals in our study reported feeling that their well-being had improved with age,” lead author Dilip Jeste, M.D., told *Psychiatric News*. “This counterintuitive increase in well-being with aging persisted even after accounting for variables such as income, education, and marriage.”

Jeste said the message for clinicians is that an optimistic approach to the care of seniors may help reduce societal ageism. “There is considerable discussion in public forums about the financial drain on society due to rising costs of health care for older adults.... But, successfully aging older adults can be a great resource for younger generations,” he said. “Perfect physical health is neither necessary nor sufficient” for successful aging, Jeste said.

From: “Association Between Older Age and More Successful Aging: Critical Role of Resilience and Depression by D. V. Jeste, G. N. et al. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2012, 10,1176.

*** IN THE NEWS ***

* Workouts Jolt the Memory

Exercise is good for many things, but in this unusual study researchers found it may also be good for mental abilities such as memory. In this case, University of California researchers recruited 31 normally functioning adults, and 23 who had been diagnosed with a mild cognitive impairment. In particular, the latter group had trouble remembering things. Each participant was shown a series of 20 emotionally positive images – baby animals, sports scenes, and beautiful landscapes. Then half of each group walked on treadmills to exercise for 6 minutes at 70% of their aerobic maximum. The other half of each group sat quietly. All were later tested for their memory of the photos.

As the results showed, the exercise significantly increased the recall of the photos. Among the normally functioning group, this single bout of exercise increased their recall of photos and details by 30% over their control group. Among those diagnosed with impairment, the exercise group improved their recall even more. They were able to remember twice as many photos and details as did those who did not exercise. They did not do as well as the seated group with no impairment, but it was still a great improvement.

Clearly this research shows the benefits of some vigorous activity in improving our memories. The duration of these effects remains unknown. However, the results do raise the question of how to simulate treadmill walking on a regular basis in the quiet of our homes. If a treadmill isn't handy, perhaps shoveling, raking and mowing lawns might be a start.

From: Workouts jolt the memory, *LA Times*, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 3, 2012.

* Catching the Ageism in Ourselves

Ageism, that is the tendency to discriminate against older people, is a national habit. Evidence can be easily garnered from the media – whether on talk shows, sit coms, or the news. Often we don't even notice when ageism occurs, and that is because we carry our ageism right into the aging years. So long as we sustain these attitudes, we are undermining our own well-being. Becoming sensitive to such tendencies is a form of positive consciousness raising.

We agree with Carol Orsborn who believes that this generation of baby boomers can alter the tide of negativity. She recommends avoiding comments, satire or jokes that revile, infantilize or marginalize aging or older people. She also suggests that phrases such as “young at heart” or “youthful” be replaced by words that are age-neutral, such as “vital” and “passionate”. She also argues that statements, such as “You look great for your age,” are not helpful, and that “You look great” is sufficient to convey appreciation, without making the hidden assumption that normally people of your age look terrible.

Equating qualities, usually associated with youth, such as physical strength, exceptional health, beauty or mental acuity with successful aging is not always accurate or life-enhancing. Such criteria should be disconnected from the idea of successful aging. In fact, as the research we report above in this issue shows, many people do sever these ideas.

It may also be self-defeating at 65 to keep trying to act in a manner that was useful at 25. And, it is worth noting, we have the power to “stop wasting valuable energy either seeking approval or proving how much better we are than others.” As we age, we become free to engage in life however we wish, without worrying about how it looks to others. As the famous poem by Jenny Joseph says, “When I

am an old woman, I shall wear purple with a red hat that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me."

From: Our Generation, Ourselves: Waking up to Baby Boomer Ageism by Carol Orsborn. *Aging Today*, November-December, 2012, pg. 3. Orsborn is founder of www.FierceWithAge.com

* Ravi Shankar, Playing 'til the End

Indian's most famous musician, Ravi Shankar died in his home in San Diego, December 11, 2012, at the age of 92. People of our generation were the first to listen in rapture to Beatles' songs influenced by his sitar music, such as "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds." Although a classic sitar player, he became something of a pop idol in the US, playing at venues such as the Monterey International Pop Festival in California, and the famous Woodstock festival. Shankar composed movie scores, including *Gandhi*, the Oscar-winning film in 1982, and he also wrote music for world famous musicians, such as composer Philip Glass, violinist Yehudi Menuhin and flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal. He won three Grammys, including one for the *Concert for Bangladesh*, a benefit for Pakistan refugees, as well as for *Full Circle: Carnegie Hall, 2000*. He was highly regarded in India for his rigorous investment in traditional Indian music. Shankar was born in Varanasi, India, in 1920, and began playing music as a young child. In 1930 he moved to Paris with his mother, and began performing with the family dance and musical troupe. Later he returned to India and opened a school of music in Mumbai (then Bombay), as well, as one in California. One of his daughters is Norah Jones, a well-known pop singer, and the other is Anoushka Shankar, also a sitarist.

Shankar continued to the very end to perform. His last recital was on November 4 in California, approximately one month before his death.

From: Ravi Shankar, Sitarist and muse, dies at 92 by David Wilson & Siddharth Philip. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 12, 2012, A-15.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

* Human Values in Aging Newsletter, edited by Harry (Rick) Moody and the Office of Academic Affairs at AARP, is distributed by the Humanities and Arts Committee of The Gerontological Society of America. The Newsletter contains interesting and inspiring items related to humanistic gerontology, along with brief and timely announcements. To submit items of interest or to subscribe contact: hrmoody@yahoo.com

* For scholars in positive aging: CALL FOR PAPERS

You are invited to submit or recommend papers to the Advances in Aging Research (AAR, ISSN: 2169-0502), an open access journal. For more about the Aims & Scope or other information, please visit the following website: www.scirp.org/journal/aar

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

The 6th Annual Conference on Positive Aging, sponsored by Fielding Graduate University, will be held in Los Angeles, CA, Feb. 10-12, 2013. Keynote speakers include Ram Dass (author *Still Here*) and Wendy Lustbader (author of *Counting on Kindness* and *Life Gets Better*). In addition, James Birren will receive the Lifetime Achievement Award for Creative Longevity and Wisdom, from Fielding Graduate University.

For more about the upcoming conference visit:

<http://www.positiveaging.fielding.edu/>

February 28-March 3, 2013. 39th AGHE Annual Meeting & Educational Leadership Conference. "Waves of Change: Charting the Course for Gerontology Education." Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront, St. Petersburg, FL. Aghe.org/am

March 12-16, 2013: *Aging in America: 2013 Annual Conference of the American Society on Aging*. Chicago, IL. Each year this conference brings together relevant content, innovations, best practices and replicable models, and develops leadership on the most critical issues in the field of aging. Among the timely topics addressed will be care transitions, global aging, post-election implications, transforming retirement, diversity, financial competence and much more. Early registration is now open. Register before January 31 and save up to \$100. www.asaging.org/aia

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*** Information for Readers ***

- Questions & Feedback

If you have any questions, or material you'd like to share with other newsletter readers, please e-mail Mary Gergen at gv4@psu.edu

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